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## THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE BELARUSIAN RED CROSS SOCIETY IN 1920s<sup>12</sup>

*The article characterizes the process of the formation of the Belarusian Society of Red Cross at the beginning of the 1920s. The organizational structure of the Belarusian Red Cross was characterized, its composition, essence of activity were studied. It is shown, that at the beginning of its existence the Belarusian Red Cross's main activities were the assistance to refugees and struggle against poverty and hunger, but this activity was limited due to the weak resources of the Society. The main factors, that predetermined the weakness of the Red Cross organization – the Polish-Soviet War and postwar poverty of the population of Belarus were revealed. It was proved, that due to the consequences of the New Economic Policy the Belarusian Red Cross faced serious financial problems, which were solved with the assistance of the state that led to its growing influence on the Red Cross by the mid-1920s.*

**Keywords:** Belarusian Red Cross Society, healthcare, Polish-soviet war, Socialistic Soviet Republic of Belarus, charter, refugees.

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## СТАНОВЛЕНИЕ БЕЛОРУССКОГО ОБЩЕСТВА КРАСНОГО КРЕСТА В 1920-х гг.<sup>3</sup>

*В статье охарактеризован процесс становления Белорусского общества Красного Креста в начале 1920-х гг., восстановлена организационная структура Белорусского общества Красного Креста, изучен его состав, сущность деятельности. Показано, что в начале своего существования основным направлением деятельности Белорусского Красного Креста была помощь беженцам и борьба с нищетой и голодом, однако данная деятельность была ограниченной ввиду слабости ресурсов общества. Выявлены основные факторы,*

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*предопределившие слабость организации Красного Креста – польско-советская война и послевоенная бедность населения Беларуси. Доказано, что из-за последствий Новой экономической политики Белорусский Красный Крест столкнулся с серьезными финансовыми проблемами, которые решались при содействии государства, что привело к росту его влияния на Красный Крест к середине 1920-х годов.*

**Ключевые слова:** Белорусское общество Красного Креста, здравоохранение, польско-советская война, Социалистическая Советская Республика Беларуси, устав, беженцы.

**Introduction.** The Belarusian Red Cross Society is one of the oldest and most remarkable charity organization in the history of social work in Belarus. The history of the Belarusian Red Cross has some clear periods: prerevolutionary, when the Society was established, the soviet period, and the modern period since Belarus has gained its independence. From more than 100 years of its history, the biggest part of the Belarusian Red Cross's existence and activity fell for the soviet period (1921–1991). This article is dedicated to the history of the creation of the Red Cross Society of the Socialistic Soviet Republic of Belarus (SSRB, later – the Belarusian Socialistic Soviet Republic ((BSSR) and its activity during the 1920s.

**Main part.** During the prerevolutionary period at the beginning of the XXth century Belarus was the part of the Russian Empire which predetermined almost total absence of the own national charity organizations but the existence of plenty branches of the russian charity societies, including the Russian Society for the Care of the Wounded and Sick Warriors that was established in 1867 and renamed to the Russian Red Cross Society in 1879 [1, p. 12]. Before the beginning of the First World War (1914–1918), the Russian Society of the Red Cross had built a huge network of medical and sanitary institutions, communities of sisters of mercy, which became a significant part of the healthcare system in the first decades of the XXth century and during the First World War.

After the October Revolution most charity organizations, including the Red Cross, didn't support the Bolshevik's coup, that predetermined an immediate reaction of the new state authorities. On January 6, 1918, the Russian Red Cross Society was closed according to the Decree of the Council of People's Commissars. Later the Red Cross Society was reestablished on the soviet basis, but it couldn't

act on the territory of Belarus due to continued warfare of the First World war [2].

After the collapse of the Soviet-German peace negotiations in Brest-Litovsk, the German army occupied most of the territory of Belarus by the spring of 1918. The formal existence of local Red Cross departments continued, but lack of resources and funding predetermined their eventual closure. For example, the Red Cross of the Western front had only 41 employees, with 3 hospitals in Minsk and 4 in Gomel in April, 1918 [3, p. 2]. On the part of Belarusian lands which remained under the control of the Bolsheviks, many hospitals and other medical institutions, that used to belong to the Russian Red Cross Society, were transferred to the jurisdiction of the local soviet medical and sanitary authorities [4, p. 45–46].

After the retreat of the German troops at the end of 1918 and the formation of the Socialistic Soviet Republic of Belarus, January 1, 1919, the potential formation of the Red Cross society in Soviet Belarus was interrupted by the beginning of the Polish-Soviet war and the Polish occupation of most of the territory of Belarus. Since January 1919, all medical specialists, including former Red Cross employees, who were the members of this organization during the First World War, began to be mobilized into the army [5, p. 4].

The end of the Polish-Soviet War in 1921 and the beginning of peaceful construction provided an opportunity to create the Red Cross society in the SSRB. Unlike the period of the Russian Empire, that had no single healthcare management body, in the SSRB the People's Commissariat of Healthcare was created, which had a direct connection to the Red Cross from the beginning of its activity. Soviet policy was aimed at unification of medical resources that predetermined the entry of a representative of the Commissariat of Healthcare – Deputy People's Commissar S. Barkusevich into the

provisional Committee for the establishment of the Belarusian Red Cross. The same reasons later led to the election of S. Barkusevich as head of the Belarusian Red Cross, the creation of which was finalized on September 15, 1921 [6, p. 130 b.].

According to its first Charter, the Belarusian Red Cross was determined as *'an organization that assisted the Government of the Belarusian Republic through its institutions, both military and civil'* [7, p. 4]. As the main tasks of the Belarusian Red Cross the following activities were approved:

- 1) providing medical and sanitary assistance to sick and wounded soldiers and meeting their spiritual and material needs during the war;

- 2) aid to the prisoners of war;

- 3) medical and sanitary assistance to the civil population during natural and other disasters [7, p. 4].

One of the first steps of the state relative to the Red Cross was the Resolution of the Council of the People's Commissars "About the protection of the symbol of the Red Cross" from December 1, 1921. According to this Resolution, the right to use the symbol of the Red Cross was given to the Belarusian Red Cross Society as the only national society of assistance to the sick and wounded warriors which was authorized by the government [8, p. 1].

During the beginning of the 1920s the Belarusian Red Cross Society had gained a simple but stable structure, which was formalized by the approval of the second Charter of the Belarusian Red Cross in 1925. According to the new Charter, on the supreme level the Society was ruled by the Chairman, the Central Committee of Belarusian Red Cross Society (term of office – 1 year), and All-Belarusian conferences of Red Cross Society members, that took place once a year. The conferences elected the members of the Central Committee (no less than 5) for the next year [9, p. 8]. The close connection between the activity of the Red Cross and healthcare predetermined that M. Barsukoŭ, People's Commissar of Healthcare of BSSR (1924–1930), held the position of the Chairman of the Belarusian Red Cross Society during the 1920s.

On the provincial level, the Belarusian Red Cross Society was represented by Local departments that were ruled by Department

Committees and Department members' meetings. At the lower level, the Red Cross consisted of the Primary cells in companies (plants, factories), agricultural manufactures, educational institutions, army subdivisions. A typical Primary cell of the Red Cross was led by a bureau headed by an executive secretary [10, p. 15].

It should be noted, that the nature of interstate relations between the RSFSR and the SSRB led to the restriction of the international activities of the SSRB, as a result of which the foreign representation of the Belarusian Red Cross Society was transferred to the Russian Red Cross Society [11, p. 1]. Besides, the International Committee of Red Cross did not recognize the Belarusian Red Cross Society as a member of the International Red Cross Committee [12, p. 43–44]. Formal international legalization of the Belarusian Red Cross took place only in 1925 when it joined the Union of Red Cross and Crescent of the USSR [13, p. 147]. These factors predetermined that the main efforts of the Belarusian Red Cross were directed not at international affairs but domestic ones.

One of the most useful activities of the Red Cross at the beginning of its existence in Soviet Belarus became the assistance to the refugees, that flooded the territory of SSRB due to the repatriation process (one of the conditions of the Peace of Riga) and hunger in the Volga region. For the feeding of the refugees, the network of food points was established and more than a million rations had been distributed from 1922 to 1923 [14, p. 21].

Due to the poverty in post-war Belarus, the prostitution became widespread. That's why the struggle against prostitution by helping the poor became one of the tasks of the Red Cross either [14, p. 21]. Another major activity of the Belarusian Red Cross became assistance to students (free food and clothes first of all).

The beginning of the New Economic Policy predetermined the reduction of charity activity due to the financial crisis. The Belarusian Red Cross had to increase its own budget and started commercial activity by selling products of private companies on a contractual basis [13, p. 146]. However, this activity did not help the Red Cross: by the beginning of 1924, the Red Cross had 113 000 rubles of debts [14, p. 22]. Only the Government's financial help and the Society

growth which was related to the returning of the territory of the Vitebsk and Gomel regions to the BSSR in 1924–1926 helped to restore finances and therefore the regular activity of the Belarusian Red Cross in the middle 1920s. Since that time the Belarusian Red Cross abandoned commercial activity [13, p. 146].

The help of the state, joining the Union of Red Cross and Crescent of the USSR, and the following improvement of the financial situation was accompanied by further increasing government participation in the Red Cross activity, which more and more acquired the features of the state organization. The end of the 1920s was marked by a struggle for international recognition of the Belarusian Red Cross as a legal representative of Belarus in the International Red Cross Community. In 1926 the Belarusian Red Cross began to edit its own journal “Bulletin of the Central Bureau of the Belarusian Red Cross Society” which became one of the most significant medical periodicals in the history of Soviet Belarus [15, p. 73].

It should be noted that at the beginning of the Belarusian Red Cross activity it had slow growth rate due to the poverty of the SSRB citizens therefore there were very few members of the Society in comparison to the other Soviet republics. During the first years of existence, the Belarusian Red Cross expanded its membership mainly at the expense of medics only [13, p. 146]. In 1923–1924 there were 1500 members of the Belarusian Red Cross only. The rapid growth of the Society took place in 1925–1926 due to the returning of the Vitebsk and Gomel regions to the BSSR (Table 1).

Due to the consequences of the Polish-Soviet War 1919–1921, the Belarusian Red Cross Society had several organizational problems, less membership, and accordingly worse financial situation compared to the other Red Cross Societies in the Soviet Union. Thus in 1926, the Belarusian Red Cross Society had only 5983 members (0,14 % of the population) while for example the Red Cross of Georgia – 50.000 (1,7 % of the population) (Table 2).

Table 1. – Members of the Belarusian Red Cross Society, 1926 [14, p. 49]

District	Number of departments	Number of members of Red Cross		
		Urban	Rural	Total
Mensk	11	1950	1200	3150
Viciebsk	–	720	–	720
Polack	2	246	–	246
Orsha	10	–	–	1052
Mazyr	–	200	–	200
Barysaŭ	–	75	–	75
Kalinin	–	97	–	300
Mahilioŭ	–	50	–	50
Babrujsk	–	130	–	130
Sluck	–	60	–	60

Table 2. – Soviet Red Cross Societies in the mid-1920s [14, p. 50]

Red Cross Society	Number of members	Number of institutions	Annual budget	Percentage (%) Members/population
Ukrainian	250 000	630	3 001 947	0,8
Russian	60 193	– <sup>1</sup>	2 133 981	0,07
Georgian	50 000	50	200 000	1,7
Belarusian	5 610	19	116 000	0,14

<sup>1</sup> No data.

**Conclusion.** Thus, the consequences of the First World war and the Polish-Soviet war predetermined, that the Belarusian Red Cross Society was established later compared to other Soviet Red Cross societies. The same reasons led to unstable financial situation and relatively small number of members of the organization. At the beginning of the 1920s the Belarusian Red Cross had to begin the commercial activity due to the reduced government and international fundings, but since solving the financial problems with the help of the state authorities in the mid-1920s the activity of the Belarusian Red Cross Society became closely related to the state policy by serving interests of healthcare mostly. Despite all the difficulties, the main achievement of the Belarusian Red Cross Society during the 1920s was the development of a stable internal structure which became the basis of subsequent development.

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